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ABSTRACT

This brief study classifies the newspaper content into various standard categories, and measures in column inches the amounts of news in eight high school newspapers. The four main categories of newspaper content measured were news, sports news, editorials and features, and advertising. News was classified as administration, activities, community, curricular, organizations, sports, recognition, and miscellaneous. Results of the analysis show that student organizations and activities, including sports, are newsworthy but curricular activities are not. High school newspapers staffs should learn to evaluate their own efforts objectively. (DB)

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MEASURE THE CONTENT OF YOUR SCHOOL PAPER
(A Quill and Scroll Inquiry)

By Laurence R. Campbell

What is the news? Demosthenes in 351 B. C. wrote that the Athenians often asked this question. Students, teachers, and parents ask this question about high schools today.

What do we see and hear, think and feel, decide and do? What are the ideas, events, and problems that interest us? How do we define news? These questions may be asked in evaluating all newspapers, including high school newspapers.

Certainly judges of critical services encourage systematic coverage of news. Quill and Scroll Studies recently raised the question as to whether school newspapers actually present a balanced picture of the student and his school.

In 1967 Dr. George R. Klare and the writer completed an investigative study of "Measuring Readability of High School Newspapers." It asked, "How readable are high school newspapers?" It also presented a simple method by means of which advisers and staffs could measure the readability of their newspapers. (This booklet can be obtained from Quill and Scroll Foundation for ¢.50.)

The current study much more modest in scope is concerned not with how the news is written but with what news is published. It is a content measurement study. It classifies the newspaper content into various standard categories and measures in column inches the amounts of news in eight high school newspapers.

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This investigation is an exploratory study. It is an attempt, first, to encourage newspaper staffs to make their own analyses of their newspapers from issue to issue. It also is an experimental enterprise to determine what problems arise in classifying, recording, and interpreting the data.

This study was limited in scope. First, only eight high school newspapers were examined. Second, only one issue of each newspaper was measured. Accordingly, it is not to be supposed that sweeping generalizations will be made on the basis of such limited evidence.

The newspapers chosen for study have been recognized by critical services as very good newspapers. Therefore, they may not be described as typical, ordinary, or average. This study concerns itself only with the content that appeared, not what could have or should have been printed.

The newspapers chosen were:

The Chit-Chat, Waggener High School, Louisville, Ky., Bi-weekly, January.

The Tower, Grosse Pointe High School, Grosse Pointe, Michigan, Weekly,January.

The Orange, White Plains High School, White Plains, N. Y., Published every three weeks. January.

The Beacon, Woodrow Wilson High School, Washington, D. C. Published monthly. January.

The Journal, Parkersburg High School, Parkersburg, W. Va. Frequency of publication not stated in masthead. January.

The Journal, John Adams High School, Cleveland, Ohio., Bi-weekly, January.

The Orange and Black, Grand Junction High School, Grand Junction, Colo., Bi-weekly, January.

High Notes, Hartsville High School, Hartsville, S. C. Published eight times a year. February.

The eight newspapers were printed. All issues were winter issues. They come from the East, Middle West, South, and Rocky Mountain states.

Judges of newspaper critical services need to raise the questions as to whether a newspaper published less frequently than every week or two weeks actually can provide a good or substantial news service, to say nothing of deserving a rating as superior or excellent. It seems pointless to expend energy on writing about what happened a month before the newspaper was circulated.. Under such conditions the newspaper is simply a historical record.

Four main categories of newspaper content were measured: (1) news, (2) sports news, (3) editorials and features, (4) advertising. Content in the first three categories was identified as to location on the page, number of page, size of headline, and number of column inches. News was classified as an (1) advance, (2) followup, or (3) "other" news.

News was classified thus: (1) administration, (2) activities, (3) community, (4) curricular, (5) organizations, (6) sports, (7) recognition, (8) miscellaneous. Subdivisions of the first six headings also were examined. This system probably is not yet foolproof, for some news easily may fall under more than one heading.

Approximately one-half of the news stories were followups, one-third were advances, and the others were classified as neither. Organizations and activities had more advances than followups. There were nearly twice as many sports followups as advances. Perhaps there is an over-emphasis in telling readers what already has happened.

Headlines were measured as to whether they were one, two, three, four, or five columns wide. There were more two-column headlines than one-column headlines and nearly as many three-column headlines as one-column headlines. The newspapers averaged about three photographs per issue. There were no photographs of curricular news and only one of organization news for all eight newspapers.

More than one-half of the administration stories made page one, but only about one-fifth of the community news stories rated the first page. More than half of the news of activities and organization made page one, but only one-fifth of the curricular news received such a favorable rating. Sports news properly appeared on sports pages with the exception of one sports story on page one.

Consider the position on the page. Administration news in two times out of three was in the upper left or upper right of whatever page it appeared on. Community news was above the fold about half the time. Curricular news broke even. About three times out of four sports news was above the fold, more often in the upper left than the upper right. Activities were above the fold about two-fifths of the time, but organizations were above the fold a little over half the time. Recognition stories were above the fold two times out of three. Keep in mind, of course, that advertisements more often are below the fold.

Administration news stories covered buildings, facilities, food service, personnel, and "other," but did not cover business activities, school finance, the grounds, health services, or schedule. Nearly half of the space in this category was for personnel stories.

Community news did cover board of education and "other" stories, but none of the newspapers had news of adult education, alumni, education week - probably in November, and parents' auxiliaries or parent-teacher associations.

Only six of the eight newspapers discovered any news of the school's academic programs. None had any news of what was happening in agriculture, industrial arts, guidance, homerooms, journalism, library, mathematics, music (courses), physical science, or special fields. Here are eight schools probably with more than a thousand students in each enrolled in five or more courses a day for one, two, or more weeks. So nothing happened!

Consider news of activities. Chorus and dramatics get the most space. The analyst looked for the honor roll - unsuccessfully. Maybe it appears in other issues. None of the newspapers published news of the yearbook or activities other than those of the newspaper and magazine staffs. Debates receive skimpy attention.

Consider organizations. Social events, the senior class, and the junior class get as much attention as the student council. Homerooms aren't mentioned - nor are career clubs.

Since it was basketball season, stories of the sport received the major emphasis. There were a few football remnants to report, but there was no news of baseball, tennis, golf. Neither intramural nor girls' sports received much attention. League standings seldom were reported.

Two or three editorials were published in each newspaper. They averaged nearly seven column inches in length. Creative writing was spurned, for there were neither stories nor essays, although the eight newspapers averaged slightly more than one-column inch of poetry per issue.

Column writing is neglected, particularly in the area of criticism and guidance. Students have little opportunity to express their views through letters to the editor, question-and-answer stories, polls, and the like. The what and who feature articles dominate the feature pages, but when, where, why, or how articles seldom if ever appear.

An analysis of the advertising content reveals that the one-inch one-column advertisement is on the way out in these eight newspapers. Two-inch one-column ads are common, but there are few instances of one-column ads of three, four, five, six, or more inches. Almost one-half of the total column inches is in two-column advertisements, but four of the newspapers report three-column advertisements, three report four-column advertisements, and one reports one five-column advertisement.

Tentative conclusions presented here do not constitute an appraisal of any newspaper studied. None will be singled out for special attention. A more thorough inquiry would be feasible if several issues of each newspaper could be examined. Perhaps insufficient funds make it difficult to develop some possibilities of these newspapers. For example, several are unable to publish every week or at least every other week.

What happens in high schools today? What gets in the school newspapers? The image of the secondary school herein portrayed is that it is a teen center in which student organizations and activities, including sports, are newsworthy. What happens in the classroom, library, or counseling center is not. If you want to be recognized by your peers, get into an organization or on a team instead of on the honor roll.

The alumnus, parent, or taxpayer reading high school newspapers may wonder whether there are curricular activities provided. He may wonder whether developments in the curriculum are news. He may wonder whether student achievement in the academic program is recognized. Hence, he as well as the students who go to school to learn in the classroom as well as in worthwhile co-curricular activities may be disappointed in the high school newspaper as a news medium.

The editors of these newspapers give considerable space to their opinions in two or three editorials per issue. For the most part they provide no critical guidance in the fine arts or public arts. Nor do they give much attention to the opinions of the readers. Opportunities to provide dynamic and constructive leadership are not being developed as fully as possible - despite ample space which could be used more effectively.

The diversity of content in the feature pages may be described as usually consisting of what and who features and not much else. Creativity in writing receives scant encouragement in most instances. Staff members are not learning to write how-to-do-it articles or when, where, and why features.

To be sure, analysts may have overlooked some of the content. Perhaps the classification system is imperfect in some respects. Even so the function of the high school newspaper is to present the whole school in perspective through a balanced presentation of news.

High school newspapers will improve not when staffs either welcome or resist tentative conclusions like these but when the staffs learn to evaluate their own efforts objectively. Hence, the ideal staff should make periodic measurements of the content of the newspapers it produces. The amateur journalist moves toward professional status by welcoming criticism and engaging in self-criticism.

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